Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care

NEW Directions

November 29, 2007

Systems Thinking

Stewardship Competency Series

Systems thinking improves the ministry's ability to develop strategic policy

Stewardship requires the ministry to plan strategically to achieve positive long-term outcomes for the health system. This requires ministry staff to become able systems thinkers, said Hugh MacLeod, assistant deputy minister, Health System Accountability and Performance (HSAP).

"Systems thinking is a discipline that helps with problem solving by broadening our thinking. It allows us to see the whole picture, which helps with planning, evaluation and implementation," MacLeod said.

Systems thinking is the ability to perceive and understand the ministry and the health care system as a set of interdependent or interacting parts with many connections and linkages. A systems thinker always strives to understand the connections and complexities of the big picture. How do the components within the ministry or the health system come together, interact and impact on each other, as well as the whole? This is the question at the core of systems thinking.

Systems thinking is one of 15 stewardship competencies identified by the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care. The stewardship competencies are a set of skills, knowledge and behaviours that collectively will help employees be successful in their work as the ministry transitions to stewardship.

The skills of a systems thinker include:

- The ability to recognize linkages and interdependencies
- Considering and anticipating the significance of far-reaching impacts
- Recommending and implementing plans based on broad-based analysis.

"To flourish within the ministry, systems thinking requires staff to work cross-functionally and straddle the boxes on divisional organizational charts, "MacLeod explained. "By being flexible and working co-operatively across divisions, we can bridge the white spaces on the organizational chart and function well as a complex system."

MacLeod stressed that to be a systems thinker doesn't mean you have all the answers. Rather it involves recognizing that you don't have all the answers, which should spur you to ask the right questions — even if they are difficult ones.

A systems thinking approach is essential to help the ministry make decisions about how best to spend limited health care dollars, said Cristina Perez, director of the Strategic Investment Planning branch, Health System Investment and Funding (HSIF). "We need to make all the linkages in thinking about all the things that will impact on health spending," she said. Perez noted that her branch was created out of the necessity to plan for and make funding decisions in a strategic way, in keeping with the ministry's stewardship mandate.

At an organizational level, good systems thinking will improve the ministry's ability to develop strategic policy for the health system. "Systems thinking is critical to strategic planning. You have to take a look at the broad goals of the ministry for the health system — keeping Ontarians healthy, improving access to care, accountability and sustainability. How do we fit all these pieces together? How do we forecast the needs of the health system? You need a systems thinking approach to answer these kinds of questions and formulate funding decisions," Perez explained.

"If services are increased in hospitals to send cardiac patients home sooner, how will this impact on patient demand for home care? We can't make funding decisions in isolation. The new structure of the ministry necessitates systems thinking," Perez said.

MacLeod said that it is important to understand that systems thinking requires staff to look beyond the ministry to find solutions. He uses the example of the Wait Time Strategy and how the program set up expert panels — on issues like critical care and diabetes — to engage the entire health system.

"We had 18 expert panels. There were 400 people sitting on these panels and they interfaced with another 2,000 people from across the health system. We have put over 80 recommendations made by the field into operation."

"We created a space that allowed a range of people to come to the table. Once they got there we didn't shut down the conversation," MacLeod said. "The future lies in engaging the ideas and talent from across the ministry and the health system to show us the best way forward." ■

NEW Directions

NEW Directions, published for employees of the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care by the Communications and Information Branch, can be read on-line at INFOweb at *http://infoweb.moh.gov.on.ca/*.

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Do you have questions about the organizational change?

- Ask your manager
- E-mail your questions or comments to the feedback account at *anewdirection@ontario.ca*
- Call the feedback line at 1-800-268-1758 or TTY 1-800-387-5559

Competency Resources

Competency skills can be acquired and developed in a number of ways, including through personal research, mentoring and by working within cross–functional teams in the new business model.

The following books can be useful as resources to learn more about the systems thinking approach:

- *Getting To Maybe: How The World Has Changed* by Brenda Zimmerman, Frances Westley and Michael Quinn Patton
- *Leadership and the New Science, Discovering Order in a Chaotic World* by Margaret J. Wheatley
- *The Fifth Discipline* by Peter Senge

For an overall explanation of the ministry's stewardship competencies, refer to the **MOHLTC Stewardship Competencies Guide**. Information on learning and development programs can be found in the **Learning and Development** section on INFOweb.

Q & A Update

What's New

Deputy Minister responds to your questions and concerns

Deputy Minister Ron Sapsford is committed to answering staff questions about the ministry's transition to stewardship. He videotaped answers to a range of questions that were raised during recent divisional staff meetings on the ministry's transitional organizational structure. The video is available for you to view under **Deputy Minister — Questions and Answers** in the A New Direction section.